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FUNERAL & CREMATION

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Making The South Shore A Better Place

Community Spotlight:
New England Burial at Sea LLC

New England Burial at Sea, founded in 2006, is the largest coast-to-coast provider for customized ash scattering memorials and full body burials at sea in the United States. Based in Marshfield Hills, the company operates year-round from more than 87 ports and 86 different ships. Captain Brad White leads New England Burials at Sea LLC, and we spoke with him at length for this feature.

How long have you been a ship's captain? How did you get into ash scattering and full-body burials at sea?

I'm from the South Shore originally, and earned degrees in management and marketing at Ithaca College. After 20 years traveling the world while working for Sharper Image in San Francisco, I left the product business for the ocean. I earned my Master Captain's license in 2005, though I've been boating since I was a young teenager. One day, a fellow that we were doing a fishing charter for said, "Hey, can you scatter my uncle's ashes?" I said "sure," and so one become 20, then 2000, and became a real business. Now, we operate from Maine to Miami, San Diego to Seattle ports. The business has evolved from scattering ashes at sea off of Scituate to passengers aboard, and then we got into air scatterings, where we use a Cessna 172 high-wing aircraft and geo-target cremated remains over a special area for the family. We typically do that in the Northeast, where we have a better complement of airplanes.

Burial at sea has a long maritime tradition for sailors that have passed away while at sea. How has this become a growing trend for consumers seeking a ceremony for cremated remains or full body burials at sea?

Around 2009, we started getting calls about full-body burials at sea. Selfishly, I kept saying no because I didn't want to scratch the teak in the back of my really nice boat. Finally I realized that we can't say no anymore, so I went to the Boston Public Library and studied full-body burials at sea back to the Constitution days and just replicated it. Then, we buffed up a 300-year-old tradition to be something special for families that choose to do a full-body burial at sea, because they're different from a scattering family.

How big is your team? With 80-something boats operating out of 80-something ports, it sounds like a large operation.

It's kind of like a champagne taste on a beer budget, because our model is not to own boats, it's to use boats, very much like a Zipcar model. We use a boat for 2-3 hours and we don't have to pay for a crew or the service or the maintenance. We have about half a dozen people, three or four captains, a pilot, a PR person, a web person, an inside accounting specialist, and we're growing by leaps and bounds.

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When we first started in the full-body side of the business, the United States, as reported by the U.S. Navy, did two in the year 2009. They don't do very many, and they refer a lot of business to us, because we're able to assemble and get out to sea in 2 to 10 days, while the Navy, at no charge, can take 6 to 18 months, which is gut-wrenching for a family. We're very mobile and quick to react when necessary. We work with about 28 different religions, so we are compassionate and as specific to that family's religion as we can be.

How did people find out about your services?

We had a pretty strong advertising campaign with radio, television, and print, and people learned about us. They learned they could do a full-body burial at sea. Every time we take somebody, and we've taken thousands of people to sea over the years, and we're the talk of the town that next Monday when people say "hey, you know what I did this weekend?" And so when people learn about the full-body burial at sea, they say "sign me up! I'm not going to die now, but in the future I'd like to commit my body back to the ocean and feed Mother Earth." We have over 2,350 pre-need families right now, and we do take reservations when somebody has a finite period. For instance, they want to go out next June 15 because their person has passed for scattering (of their ashes).

You use old-fashioned cannonballs to weigh down the bodies. Where do you get the cannonballs from?

I was at the funeral director show in Boston in 2009 and developed this with the Navy. The sea burial shroud that we use is made of organic cotton and designed to degrade. People want to become part of the ocean. So the funeral director puts the body into the burial shroud and brings the shrouded body to the final committal—the boat. We then have our at-sea service, which can include some readings and some music, and then we raise a Burgee flag, which is a yacht flag that has 8 stars on it to indicate the eight bells and watch blessing. We fly that flag in a person's honor and then we ring the bell 8 times, and then we choreograph to their favorite song, the placement of the cannonballs. The family usually picks up the four 37.5 pound cannonballs, 150 pounds in total, into the burial shroud. The cannonballs are made at a secret factory here in Massachusetts. We have the mold. The typical cannonball for Old Ironsides is 8 to 8 and a half pounds; ours are 37.5 pounds. They're designed to be part of the burial shroud, the bottom part separate from the body. This is one of our patent-pending ideas and they work really well. When it's choreographed to music, the family can gently slide he body overboard and it goes quickly. Then we mark the coordinates where we are and fire off the ship's cannon as a finale farewell. We circle the area that we came in, and we have to be in at least 600 feet of ocean depth. That's different from a scattering, which needs to be at least three miles offshore. The full body needs to be at least three miles offshore and at least 600 feet of water depth. Here in Massachusetts, we depart out of Newburyport or Plymouth or Hyannis, and the typical round trip on a full-body burial is about six hours. In New York, it's 12 hours round trip because we have to go out 100 miles to get to 600 feet of ocean depth.

Please Scan the QR Code To Read The Full Interview

EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

Patti Marsan
Funeral Director and Advance Planning Coordinator

Patti Marsan is a Funeral Director at Keohane and handles Advance Planning in Hingham, Quincy, and Weymouth. This is Patti's second stint at Keohane, having returned to the team earlier in 2024 following an earlier stint at Keohane at the outset of her 30-year career in the business. She's a native of West Roxbury and now a resident of Easton.

Was working in the funeral industry a calling for her? "Yes," she says. "I took an elective course in college called 'Death' and I got interested in it through that. My mother was always the one in the family that was taking care of people and arranging their funerals and things like that, so that's also how I kind of got interested. When I took that 'Death' course, it talked about the psychological effects that people go through when they've lost someone and that's really what piqued my interest.

It is a bit of a counseling role, working with people struggling through loss, right? "Yes, but my role now (with Advanced Planning) is to help people prepare for loss by preparing for their services in the future. Also, part of it is seeing people that may have had a terminal diagnosis and they want to get their affairs in order before they pass so that their family doesn't have to worry about that." Advance planning offers key benefits, and Patti wants to inform readers who many not be familiar with the concept of pre-planning your final arrangements of these benefits. "You're making decisions with a clear head. A lot of times, when someone passes away suddenly and arrangements are made hastily because they're not thinking clearly. Pre-planning helps you to get the services that you want, because your family members may have different ideas. You can customize the service to your wishes. It also locks in the price, so you get the ability to pay for it in advance and lock it in. You can take it with you as well. For instance, you can pre-pay with Keohane and if you end up moving out of state, your arrangements can be transported to another state.

Plus, if you have to go into a nursing home and are forced to go on Medicaid or MassHealth, the only asset that can really be protected is your pre-paid funeral arrangement. Because a lot of people go into nursing homes as a private payer and then quickly run out of money, nursing homes are now requiring people to have a pre-arrangement before they go into the home."

Naturally, the question Patti hears most often when working with people on their advance planning is if their money is protected. "The answer is yes. Massachusetts lawas are such that the money has to be held with a third party, like an escrow account, so we can't access the funds until someone actually passes."

"Also, a lot of people think they understand the laws, but sometimes discover painfully that without a pre-planned arrangement, it can get very expensive, particularly if you're shipping casketed remains from one state to another. But if you plan in advance, it's not nearly as expensive."

With 30 years in the industry, Patti has seen some big changes. "A lot of the smaller funeral homes are gone because they didn't stay relevant and change with the community that they served. The other big thing is that years ago, everybody was traditional, with visiting hours and a funeral and burial the next day. Now, it's more likely cremation and they may opt to have less services. It's interesting to see the next generation, where some people have chosen to eliminate services and family members then don't get to grieve properly. They don't have the time to process the death as well. There's a reason that those services exist; they help bring people together and it helps them to process that the person is really gone. The services are for the people that are left behind so that they have a chance to process their grief, celebrate the life of this person that lived, that they loved."

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One big trend that Patti and the team at Keohane have observed is the shift to cremation as a preferred option. Sixty to sixty-five percent of people now choose cremation rather than burial. Why is this happening? "People think of the cost, and people think it's easier. Yet there are a lot of cremated remains in people's closets or that have been abandoned in funeral homes. The cremated remains become a burden because they have them at home and don't know what to do with them, and they feel guilty because they're at home sitting somewhere. I know of a woman who sold her house to her daughter and had her husband's remains in her trailer…and the trailer burnt down. She asked the firemen to get her husband's remains, and the firemen were able to find it because the urn was fireproof."

On a lighter note, Patti mentions her favorite parts of the job: meeting the people. "Doing advanced planning, people have such fascinating lives, what they've done for work or where they've traveled or their hobbies and things like that. I read a lot, and I like to read a lot of biographies and these are like mini-biographies. And you just get to meet so many nice people."

Keohane is an active community member in the towns we serve, and Patti notes how much this has grown over the years. "When I worked here years ago, I'd hear Ed (Keohane) say that his vision for things in Quincy, like the park across the street, that was a vision of Ed's from years ago. And now it's a reality, and all of the statues of Abigail Adams and John Adams. To see it a reality, and to see the continuing dedication to Quincy as a family, that's pretty amazing."
What else should people know about Patti? "I'm widowed, and my husband was widowed, as he was older than I was, and as much as we talked about our time and his health was failing, we really didn't have anything concrete down. You'd think being a funeral director that I'd be able to pick out a casket for him in two seconds. He told me he wanted a high gloss casket—caskets are high gloss or satin finish. He didn't like the satin finish. I had the hardest time deciding on which casket, and you'd think that was something I'd be able to make a quick decision on. I just couldn't, because I wasn't prepared. He went down quickly and died quickly. And then also the grief…people would tell me the second year is worse than the first. I didn't get it at first, but I do now. The first year, you're in such a fog and then the second year, It's like, 'now what?'"

You can contact Patti Marsan for Advance Planning needs via email: p.marsan@keohane.com or call 781.335.0045.

Meet the full Keohane team here.

BLOG HIGHLIGHT

Supporting Children Through Loss: Helping Young Minds Understand and Cope with Grief

Losing a loved one is one of life's most difficult experiences. For children, the loss of a family member, friend, or beloved pet can be especially challenging, because they're still learning to understand much of the world around them. For adults like you, whether a parent, grandparent, or guardian—helping these kids navigate their grief can feel like a monumental task in the midst of your own grief. Children process death differently from adults, and so it's critical to provide them with the right support that meets their specific needs in order to help them cope and heal.

How Children Understand Death at Different Ages

Children's ability to grasp what loss and death means varies depending on their stage of development. Tailoring your approach based on their age can help ensure they feel supported and understood. You know your kids best—you may have a precocious 4-year-old or a 10-year-old with developmental delays. Use the below as a suggested guide:

- Preschoolers (Ages 3-5): At this stage, children may not be able to comprehend that death is permanent. They might see it as temporary or reversible and may ask many questions. Simple, concrete explanations are helpful for their understanding.
- School-aged children (Ages 6-12): Kids in this age range begin to understand that death is forever. They may seem very curious and as such will probably ask lots of detailed questions. It's important to answer them honestly though gently, giving them a sense of comfort while you're validating their feelings.
- Teenagers (Ages 13-18): Teens are capable of understanding death as well as adults do, yet they can struggle to express their emotions. Encourage open conversations with them, offering a comfortable space to process feelings in their own way, whether by talking with you, writing about their loss, or engaging in creative activities like art and music.

How You Can Support a Grieving Child

Here are five ways that you can embrace to help kids process their grief in a healthy and constructive manner:

1. **Create an Emotional Safe Space**
   Let children know that it's normal and okay to feel sad, angry, or confused when death hits home. Acknowledge their emotions and reassure them that all of these feelings they're feeling are normal. Give them enough time and space to express their grief without feeling rushed or judged.
2. **Use Simple, Honest Language**
   Skip euphemisms like "passed away" or "gone to sleep," which can be confusing to young children. Instead, explain death to them in straightforward terms, like "When someone dies, their body stops working and they can't come back," for example. This helps children begin to accept and then process the reality of what has happened.
3. **Encourage Questions!**
   Grieving children often have a ton of questions about death, and it's important for you to answer them as clearly as possible. Sometimes, kids will ask the same question repeatedly. While this may be annoying to you, it's their way of coming to terms with a powerful sense of loss.
4. **Offer Reassurance**
   Children may begin to worry about their own mortality or that of others close to them after experiencing a traumatic loss. This is normal! Reassure them that although death is a natural part of life, most people live a long time, and you're there to keep them safe.
5. **Memorialize the Loved One**
   Creating personal tributes to the person who has passed away can help children cope with their grief. This could be drawing pictures, sharing stories, planting a tree, or lighting a candle in remembrance. Religious rituals may be helpful here too.

Resources for Supporting Grieving Children

Books and online resources can provide much-needed additional support and offer children deeper resources to help them better understand and cope with loss.

Books on Grief for Children

- The Invisible String, by Patrice Karst
  A beautifully written book ideal for younger kids, this book explains the concept of an invisible string connecting us to our loved ones, even when they are gone.
- When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death, by Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown. This book offers a gentle introduction to the concept of death for children ages 4-8, helping them understand what it means and how to cope.
- The Goodbye Book, by Todd Parr. This colorful, comforting book reassures children that grief is natural and provides simple ideas for expressing their emotions.
- Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss, by Pat Schwiebert and Chuck DeKlyen. Although suitable for all ages, this book is particularly helpful for older children, offering a metaphorical approach to grief and its various emotions.
- Online Resources for Families. The Dougy Center is a national leader in supporting grieving children and families. Their website offers a wealth of resources, including articles and videos on how to help children process grief.
- Sesame Street in Communities offers engaging activities and videos to help young children understand and express their feelings about loss.
- The Child Mind Institute provides expert advice for parents and caregivers, offering tips on how to talk to children about death and grief at every developmental stage.

Conclusion

Helping children through grief requires patience, honesty, and compassion. By providing children with clear explanations, encouraging them to ask difficult questions, and offering them the space needed to express their feelings comfortably, you can help make this challenging experience more manageable for them. Remember, you don't have to have all the answers; simply being there for them, acknowledging their feelings, and using helpful resources will go a long way in supporting them as they heal.

If you're facing a challenge like this and need additional support, the team at Keohane is here to help you. We can offer guidance, connect you with grief counselors, and provide resources that can help support your family through loss.

FEATURE PROFILE

The Rev. Edward Thornley, 9th Rector, The Episcopal Parish of St. John's the Evangelist, Hingham

Father Ed Thornley joined St. John the Evangelist in July 2024, Previously, he served as Day School Chaplain and Associate Rector at St. Patrick's Episcopal Church and Day School in Washington, D.C. A native of the U.K. from Canterbury, he studied theology at the University of Exeter, Westcott House in Cambridge (England) and Yale Divinity School. He served in the Church of England for eight years, before beginning his ministry in the Episcopal Church in Fort Worth, TX when he served as Middle and Upper School Chaplain at All Saints' Episcopal School.

Father Ed and his wife, Dr. Devon Abts—a Massachusetts native and theologian specializing in religion and the arts—reside in the rectory with their cats, Spyro and Duke, and enjoy a wide range of activities together outside of their pastoral duties, including hiking, cooking, enjoying music and the arts, and traveling.

You're the 9th Rector of the Episcopal Parish of St. John's the Evangelist in Hingham. What do your responsibilities as rector include?

I'm the priest in charge of the parish, and Rector is a traditional title for that. I oversee the parish. I have responsibility for worship, for pastoral care, for preaching and teaching and also helping the church to be a presence in the wider community. We're obviously a Christian community and an Episcopal Church specifically, but we also play a role in the wider community as well, connecting with different organizations and institutions, civic responsibilities, and so on. So in a way, my main role is to help lead the parish in being that Christian presence in the community. We have, on a typical Sunday, between 130 and 200 people, although we have around 4,000 members in our parish directory, and growing. It's a big church.

Coming from the U.K. and the Church of England, how do the Church of England and the Episcopalian Church interact?

It's a close relationship. There's what's called the Worldwide Anglican Communion, and it's a network of churches internationally that all historically trace their history back to the Church of England and to the Archbishop of Canterbury. So the Episcopal Church is one of those churches that was born out of that history and tradition. I was ordained in the Church of England. My wife, Devon, is American, and we met over here, and so when we were thinking about moving back to the U.S. after being in the U.K. together for some years, I could transfer quite comfortably to the Episcopal Church here.

Please share a bit about your background. What should readers of this newsletter know about you?

My wife, Devon, is an academic theologian, and we met at Yale Divinity School. I was on an exchange program over here; I was at Westcott House in Cambridge and I came to Yale for one semester. Devon was starting an academic course at the same time when I came over to do some of my ordination training, and we met in classes one day, and that's how we got together. Devon and I have family on both sides of the pond. We like traveling a lot. We have family and friends all over so we enjoy traveling. We're very big on hiking and cycling and getting outside. We also love cooking. We're vegetarians, but we're not too fussy anyway (laughs). We've got two cats, and we like spending time with our friends and family and getting involved in the community, just getting out and getting to know people. We just love learning and being among people.

You've been Rector for just a few months, having been brought on this past summer. How's the experience been so far? What's been a bigger challenge than expected? What's been a pleasant surprise?

Although we arrived here in July, my official institution is on November 19, when the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts will come and officially install me. It's been a really joyful move overall.

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I've been in specifically education chaplaincy for some years, having served parishes before, and so my role at St. John's is a happy return to parish life. Though this is actually the first time I've been a Rector of a parish. I've been an associate and I've done basically the same kind of job before, but this is the first time I've been in charge. There are lots of new things to get used to; as well as being a priest who has responsibility for worship, pastoral care and preaching and being out in the community, I also have to oversee all the technical things, like, the finances and buildings and grounds committees and all the different organizational administrative elements. I've done those things before, and I enjoy them, but there are a lot of things like that to get used to very quickly. It's been both a joy and a challenge in that respect. But the community has been so welcoming; they've made it easy, frankly. It's a very vibrant community, very active, people who really care about each other and about Hingham as well as about the church. We've loved it. It's been great!

Were you amazed at how many Dunkin' Donuts there are in the area?

I love it! It's one of the things that brought us back to New England.

You're working on a Ph.D. in Divinity. Please shed some light: how does this work inform your philosophy as a member of the clergy? What does Divinity mean to you?

Gosh, that's a really great question! So divinity is the same as theology. Those two terms are kind of interchangeable, really. Divinity or theology essentially means talking about God, studying God and faith and religious belief, generally speaking. And for me, that's within the Christian faith, obviously, but, my Ph.D. is, in a nutshell, about how Christianity relates to other religions as well. It originally began as a project about school chaplaincy, but I'm also looking at how school chaplaincy works in the wider life of the Church, and how the wider church and very specific roles, like chaplains, can inform one another. Because normally, when we think of chaplaincy, we think about working at a specific institution, like a school or university or hospital or the armed forces, and so on. And it's often seen as being quite an isolated form of ministry. Whereas I've always been interested in thinking about how, even if you're a chaplain, say, working in a school with a very specific community, how what you do in that community can be informed by the wider church and vice versa. For example, one of the things that a chaplain in an education institution spends a lot of time doing is working with people of all different faiths. All faiths and none, as it were. I'd actually spend most of my time leading worship and providing pastoral care for people who are not Christians. The wider Church community both cares about this and needs to understand how that works further given the diverse nature of our society.

Even though I've been in Episcopal and Church of England Schools, and so working in a church-based institution, they're also profoundly multi-faith communities, and so interfaith dialogue is a real passion of mine. I love working with different faiths and again, connecting to that wider community piece. I'm a member of several different organizations that do a lot of interfaith work and also with humanism and other forms of belief and spirituality that are not necessarily tied to a specific faith community as well. And I love all of that and I engaged in a lot of this work when I worked in education chaplaincy. I was also a university chaplain for a while and did a similar thing. And so my Ph.D. is looking at questions like, what does it mean to be a Christian in a profoundly multi-faith, pluralistic world? How Christians be responsible with their faith, and how can they have a healthy, responsible faith, where you know what you believe but can learn alongside other faiths.

Remembering the importance of dialoguing with people who believe different things to you informs my ministry in parishes as well. This goes back to that civic responsibility piece and the wider community. And this includes doing funerals...I did a funeral recently for a family who didn't have any particularly strong ties to the church, but the person who died, in their wishes they left behind, said that having a funeral in a church and then a traditional burial was really important to them, and so it was a lovely opportunity to connect with the family who otherwise might not have set foot in the church. And so my Ph.D studies are about looking at different approaches to Christian theology, engaging with religious pluralism and then applying some of that theological thinking to ministry. For example, how can a chaplain in a school or university or a priest in a parish take those theological ideas about the relationship between Christianity and interfaith dialogue, and then apply them in ministry? For example, caring for someone who has different beliefs, preaching and teaching in a way which is compassionate, which is not forceful or coercive, trying to think about ways of being a healthy, responsible Christian in a multi-faith world. That's my general area.

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In this moment in America, with so much division and polarization—how essential are these interfaith dialogs in bridging some of these gaps? They seem critical.

Yeah, exactly. And that's also something that I've always believed to be really important. I've never been the sort of Christian who, to put it bluntly, goes going around telling people what they should or shouldn't do. I believe that God is love and that's why I'm a Christian. I believe that God in Christ shows us a new way to live. And that's all about love and compassion and listening and also growing and learning from people who don't necessarily share the exact same beliefs as you. Without turning this into a sermon…but if God became a human being and spent time on Earth among people, then that kind of incarnational ministry, that's what Christians like me are called to do. If we're serious about our faith, we don't just go out thinking we've got all the answers and tell people what to do. We're out there to meet God through other people, through our relationships and our communities and our encounters with other people who are very different to us. That's part of what it means to be human.

Father Ed, you first came to the United States in Fort Worth, and then went to D.C. Was it a big adjustment culturally to find yourself suddenly having gone from Cambridge, England to Fort Worth, Texas?

Without boring you with my whole life story, it was a big jump. I was at Cambridge for my ordination training, and then briefly Yale, and that's how I met Devon. And then when Devon finished up at Yale, and I was getting ordained, we got married in Boston, and then Devon got her visa and we were in the U.K. for 8 years. We were in Norwich first. I was in a six-parish team there, and then we moved to central London, and I was working in schools and universities as well as parishes. Devon was doing her Ph.D. at the time in London. Then we moved to Fort Worth, and then D.C., and then here. We both wanted to be back in the States, to be nearer Devon's family as well. And I wanted to be back in the Episcopal Church again--the Church of England's great, but I wanted to serve the Episcopal Church again.

So, to start, I got the opportunity to work at an Episcopal School as a chaplain in Fort Worth. It was an opportunity that opened up. But even though I'd been traveling to the U.S. for nearly 10 years, and particularly the Northeast, we knew Fort Worth was going to be a bit of a jump but it seemed like fun, you know. We met some wonderful people there and we ,loved it, but, yeah, it was a culture shock given everywhere else we'd lived prior.

You're married to a theologian; your dinner table conversations must be fascinating!

We're really nerdy. I mean, like, seriously, embarrassingly (laughs). Even though we've both been working in education for a long time, and as you may have seen in my on the bio on the website, Devon still works in academic theology, does conferences and works at different universities, but she's also working for a nonprofit now as Research and Operations Director for the Clemente Course in the Humanities. Devon really wanted to branch out as well and be involved in nonprofit work, wider education work, working with underserved communities. I wanted to be back in the parish again and be out in the wider community. And both of us as a couple wanted to find a nice new home church and a parish that we can both be involved with. And so this whole thing has been really important to us as a couple, as well as a church family. So everything from our dinner time conversations through to how we generally kind of roll, really, as a couple…we're very nerdy, and faith and theology is at the center, but we just love this kind of thing.

The last question is, who do you root for in the Premier League?

That's a great question! So, back home, between my mother's family and my father's family, there was always a big rift with this; basically, half of the folks love Tottenham Hotspur, and the other half love Chelsea. I didn't follow football that closely, but when we used to live in Norwich, I used to go see Norwich City play quite a bit because we lived quite close to the stadium, and that was really good fun. So I kind of got into it more through that, but I always tried to avoid the Tottenham and Chelsea thing because I just didn't want a family feud! Norwich City, I generally follow them. I'm always quite curious to see what they're up to!

Learn more about Father Ed and The Episcopal Parish of St. John the Evangelist: https://bit.ly/4fVD9QL.

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